UNITED
NATIONS

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Security Council

Distr.
GENERAL

S/24548
11 September 1992

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

LETTER DATED 11 SEPTEMBER 1992 FROM THE PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA TO THE UNITED NATIONS ADDRESSED TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE SECURITY COUNCIL

In reference to the letters to the Security Council from my President, dated 3 July 1992 and 14 July 1992, and my letters dated 13 July 1992 and 28 July 1992, regarding the urgent need to initiate relief flights to the airport in Tuzla;

I have the honour to present to you an attached abridged report, "The New Enemy: Serbs at bay, Bosnian town fights hunger", by an independent source, Mr. Roy Gutman, published in the New York Newsday on 20 August 1992, regarding the gravity of the humanitarian situation in Tuzla, and regarding the capacity of the Tuzla airport to accommodate unhindered the relief flights.

May I ask for your kind assistance in circulating the report as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) Muhamed SACIRBEY
Ambassador and
Permanent Representative

Annex

"The New Enemy: Serbs at bay, Bosnian town fights hunger"
by Roy Gutman - European correspondent

Tuzla, Bosnia-Herzegovina - The woman was 45 and well-dressed, but she had gone so long without food when she appeared outside the modest office of the Red Crescent charity earlier this month that she could not even sit up. She asked only for a glass of water with sugar.

The staff noted signs of shock and called an ambulance, but the doctor was unable to assist her because the hospital had run out of intravenous fluid. "I gave her my own breakfast, a slice of bread and a tomato," said Nejira Nalic, a Red Crescent employee. "Then we let her go. We could do nothing for her."

The woman, whose fate is unknown, is just one of thousands of victims of a severe shortage of food and medical supplies in Northeast Bosnia, where 750,000 people now live, including 150,000 mostly Muslim refugees from "ethnically cleansed" towns and villages. And the Red Crescent's inability to help her shows, in a microcosm, how ineffectual international aid has been in reducing the suffering here.

"Every day, people are going hungry. They come asking for a liter of cooking oil or a kilo of flour. People are desperate," said Sead Avdic, president of the local governing council.

But Tuzla, Bosnia's leading industrial center, is not just another city under siege. It is, in fact, the last fully functioning free region of any size in the internationally recognized country of Bosnia. It was here that local leaders, through wit, organization and a modest supply of arms, managed in May to hold off the Serb military juggernaut that captured two-thirds of Bosnia's territory. By conquering Bosnian territory the Serbs hope to expand the territory of Serbia to include ethnic Serbs wherever they live.

Now, with the Serbs at bay, the enemy is hunger. But Tuzla's pleas for international help have fallen on deaf ears. The shelves in the city's supermarkets are bare. There has been no gasoline since April. According to mayor Selim Beslagic, Tuzla normally consumes 7,300 tons of food a month, but is receiving only 400 tons a month by humanitarian convoys it has organized with its own resources and foreign donations.

As of late last week, Tuzla's Gradina Hospital had run out of antibiotics except for penicillin, of intravenous fluid and X-ray film, and was down to a three-day supply of medicine needed for kidney dialysis and only a week's worth of basic vaccines.

"Every day is dramatic. We're used to it," said Hilmija Hadzefendic, who is in charge of the city's health crisis staff. "The most dramatic moment was when we ran out of bandages. On July 26, we issued the last meter of bandage." Then they started using ripped bedsheets, and when the supply ran out, they tried cellulose. That did not work, so they turned to "cellstoff," a material used in hygienic wipes.

Tuzla and the surrounding region, historically a concentration of Bosnia-Herzegovina's mainly Muslim population, are evidence that some of the republic is still alive and functioning despite the Serb onslaught, and that Bosnians can defend themselves. But Tuzla also provides evidence of a pattern of neglect by the international community, which has ignored the Bosnian hinterlands and, driven by the presence of the world news media, focused almost exclusively on Sarajevo.

Although more than half of Bosnia's endangered Muslim population is living here, no international organization has a representative in Tuzla. City officials said this reporter was the first westerner to visit since May.

"All of the world's activity is focused on Sarajevo, as if it were the whole of Bosnia-Herzegovina," said Beslagic. "We accept that Sarajevo is unquestionably Bosnia-Herzegovina. But Bosnia-Herzegovina is also Visegrad, Gorazde, Mostar, Trebinje, and Tuzla, and we cannot accept that our destiny will be solved through only Sarajevo."

Tuzla also illustrates the enormous challenge facing every Bosnian town as fall and winter approach, compounded by its size, the influx of refugees, and its near total isolation.

The city's normal population of 80,000 has been swollen by 55,000 registered refugees. The region's usual population of 600,000 has increased by 155,000 refugees. New refugees arrive at the rate of 500 to 1,000 a day, city officials said, mostly with only the shirts on their backs and a grocery bag of belongings.

The United Nations has sent in only two relief convoys since April, leaving the city to organize resupply on its own. The only route is a primitive dirt road hacked out of the mountainside that will become impassable after the first rains of autumn.

In the last month, Beslagic sent a series of SOS messages to President George Bush, Secretary of State James Baker, UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the International Red Cross and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. "Please, do everything you could do" to open an air bridge to ease the growing crisis, he pleaded in the memo, a copy of which was made available to New York Newsday. He told them Tuzla's airport is bigger than Sarajevo's, is ready for operations, is out of line of the Serb cannon, and can easily be protected with a force of 100 UN troops. But no one replied.

"We get lots of requests," said Ron Redmond, spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Zagreb, Croatia, noting that his agency is trying to set up a warehouse in Bosnia where towns could obtain supplies and, using their own trucks, deliver the material to their citizens. But such a plan would not help Tuzla, given the political conflict that threatens to block relief convoys and the imminent closing of the road link.

UN officials in New York also appeared to be unaware of the appeal from Tuzla.

UN officials could not recall the references to Tuzla but later found in their files copies of several letters from Bosnian officials about the city's plight.